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Michael Johnston |

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The Treaty of Waitangi is a foundational document, but the way it is invoked has implications for the institutional neutrality of universities and for academic freedom, writes Dr Michael Johnston.

Dr Michael Johnston is a senior fellow at The New Zealand Initiative.

OPINION: New Zealand's university leaders seem restless. In recent months, Massey, Victoria, Canterbury and Auckland universities have all advertised for new vice-chancellors (VCs).

Along with the things one might expect in a VC, like an outstanding academic record and experience in senior management, the job ads all emphasise Treaty of Waitangi considerations. The Massey ad says that "Te Tiriti principles are central to its governance and operations". Canterbury University wants its new VC to "embed

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attention to them, or want to fund them. They will look for insight elsewhere.

Victoria University stipulates that it requires incorporation of mātauranga Māori "through all aspects of learning, teaching and research". Dissent from that line seems to have carried a high personal cost for at least one now-former lecturer, Michael Johnston writes.

ROSA WOODS/ STUFF

The result will be a less trusting and more polarised society. So, while universities are free to take public positions on matters like funding for universities, they should avoid doing so on, say, the ethics of euthanasia or climate change.

Given the profound implications of Treaty debates for the future of the country, academics with relevant expertise should have a strong role in those debates. Yet several surveys in recent years have shown that the Treaty is the issue academics and students feel least comfortable discussing. When universities make open-ended statements linking Treaty principles to their operations, which include teaching and research, they risk blunting the contributions dissenting academics might make.

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cash and many academics and administrators lost their jobs. But Kierstead, who has also written several reports on universities for the New Zealand Initiative, believed there were anomalies in the process leading to his redundancy. He took legal action against the university.

Through his lawyer, Kierstead obtained a document from the university outlining the reasons he was made redundant. The document noted his strong research record and contribution to teaching. However, it also cited "limitations" in "incorporating Māori and Pasifika perspectives" in his courses on ancient Greek history.

Vague commitments to Treaty principles and promises to incorporate mātauranga Māori in all courses and research are more than window dressing. They have real consequences, both for academics' professional lives and for universities' duty to protect academic freedom and integrity.

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